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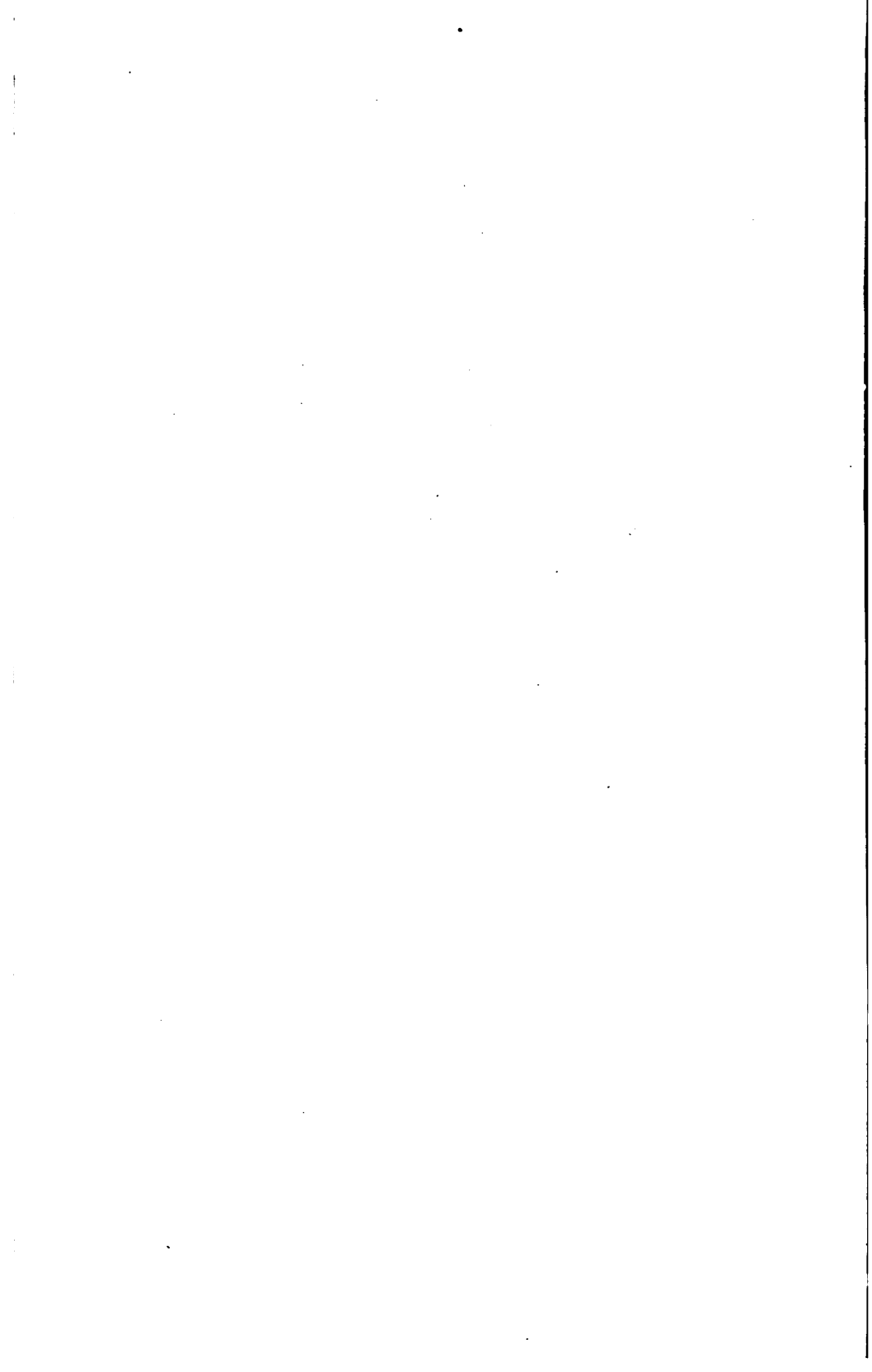
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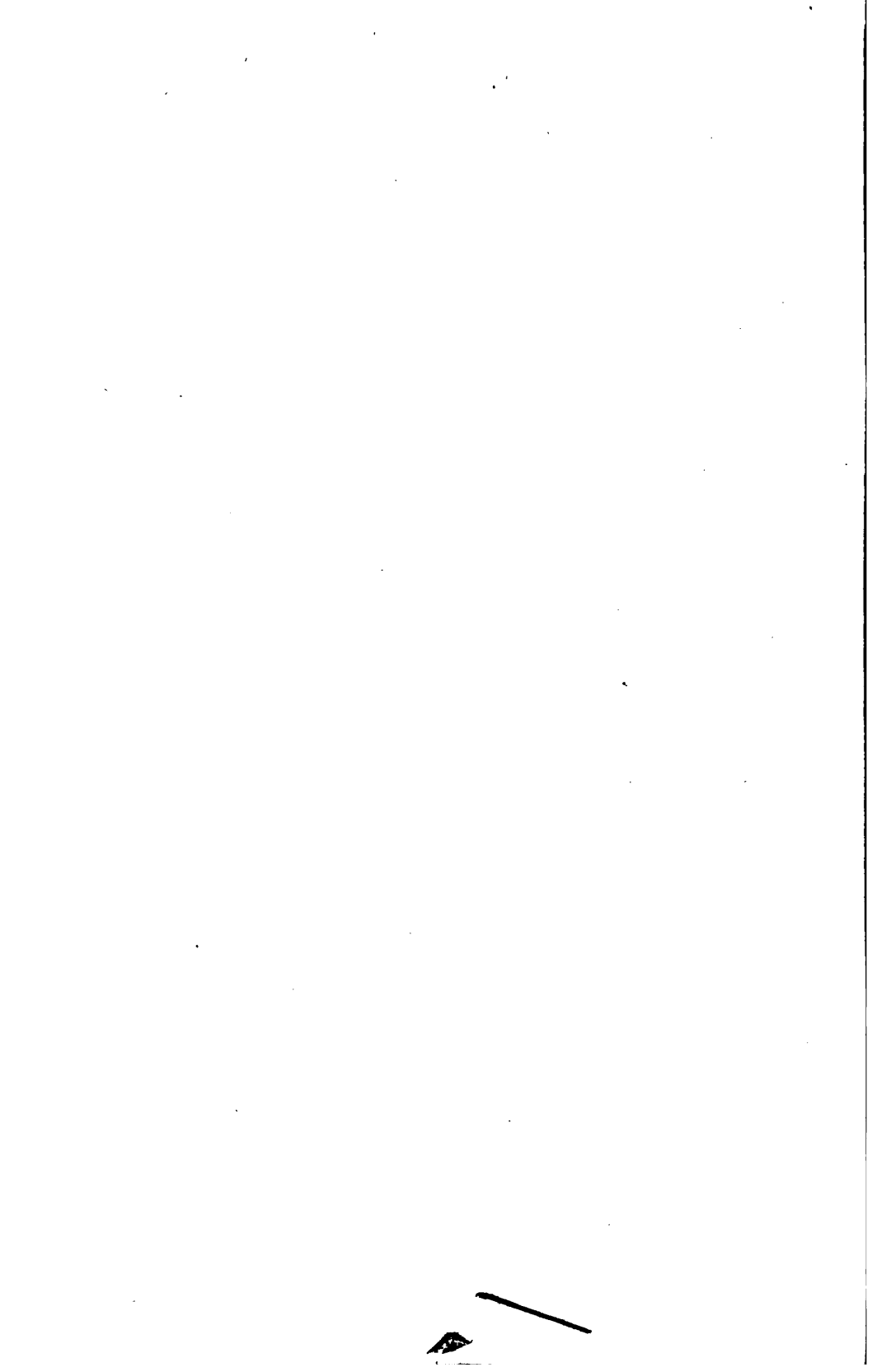
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The Dame of Ossipee.





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THE

DAME OF OSSIPEE,

A POEM.

BY

EDWIN ROSSITER JOHNSON.



READ BEFORE THE ALUMNI OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
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THE DAME OF OSSIPEE.

IGH in New-Hampshire's heart is set,
With lovely islands studded o'er,
A deep, clear lake of crooked shore,
Whose name exhausts the alphabet.
And many a mountain peak looks down
Complacent on its guarded sleep;
And gleams from wooded slope and steep
The spire of many a little town.
There quaintly, like a swan in prose,
The small white steamer takes her sail—
Through mirrored islets lightly goes,
And crosses many a garden gale
Fresh from the arms of blossomed trees
That blush all round the sheltered coast,
And bears on board a merry host,
Whose lives seem spent on summer seas.

There still the stage-coach holds its sway,
With all its comforts, all its ills,
And rumbles down at early day
To drag its burden through the hills—
The mountain trunks, piled mountain high,
The throng that round the ladder meet,
Who pass the Scripture warning by,
And scramble for the highest seat.
The sandy highway, fringed with green,
By sparkling water-courses led
Along some ancient river's bed,
With wealth of intervalle between,
Winds upward toward the mountain range,
As journeys one in morning dream,
And bridges many a murmuring stream,
And revels in continual change.
Just over there the mountains lie,
The quiet brood of quiet sky.
Just over there their shadow falls —
We wind through many a narrow dell,
And vale whose bounds more gently swell,
Right onward toward the rocky walls;
And still through this delusive air
Their rugged sides above us bend

And seem to mark our journey's end,
Just over there, just over there.

So riding on a summer day,
 Behind four sleek and heavy beasts,
Before a clerk in trim array,
 Beside the most superb of priests,
Above two city families
Long gasping for a country breeze,
With driver very much inclined
To have his joke and speak his mind,—
I saw the clouds, in tatters dressed,
Come clambering o'er the mountain crest,
Now tumbling here, now settling there,
Now buoyed a while by denser air,
Now clinging to some rocky ledge,
 In sunlight dark, in shadow pale,
Creep slowly down as if to wage
 An Indian warfare on the vale.
Our leaders snuff the coming shower,
And put forth more determined power;
Our wheels more eager crunch the sand;
We grasp the rail with firmer hand,
Hold hats against the stiffening breeze,

More nimbly dodge the drooping trees,
Fall helpless in the ambushed jolts,
Dream timidly of breaking bolts,
Suspend a while the anxious breath
Where one mis-step might hurl to death,
Dash at the low hill's rocky face,
Spin like a peg-top round its base,
Go thundering through the heaving bridge,
And roll along the causeway's ridge,—
Till horses, driver, men and freight
Seem but an animated whole,
With one quick impulse all elate,
The thrill of one impassioned soul.

There comes a crack, a crash, a fall!
And priest and driver, clerk and I,
Shot from our airy perch on high,
Land in a huddle, one and all
Receiving a promiscuous thump,
With here a scratch and there a bump.
The sight is dim, the senses reel,
The thoughts confused fly to and fro;
And yonder the seceding wheel
Goes splashing in the creek below.

The sturdy horses, trained to shocks
And accidents of every kind,
Halt in a moment, stand like rocks
Against the tumbling load behind,
And faithful hold their precious charge,
While fathers shout, and mothers faint,
And startled sleepers lift their plaint,
And frightened children cry at large.
Hard by, an elm a century old
Droops gracefully with age's weight,
Whose fibres grip with trembling hold
The hinges of a painted gate —
Much as a grandsire musing takes
A grandchild's plaything in his fingers,
And smiles, as dozing memory wakes,
A sombre smile, and o'er it lingers.
The little gate wide open swings,
With all-sufficient creak and clatter ;
And two small, sun-browned, human things
Come barefoot forth, with rustic platter
On which their childish hands have piled,
By nicely geometric courses,
Red pyramids of berries wild,
To tempt our taste and coax our purses.

Alas! they find the market flat,
Quite broken down and heavy, very—
The buyers thanking heaven that
They've missed a different kind of bury.
Both pause at once, and moving not a
Limb or a muscle, mutely stand
Forgetful of the traffic planned,
Like statuettes in terra cotta;
Until the larger whispers "Nanny,"
And bids her go and tell their granny.

The child runs back; the dame appears —
A stately form in spite of years;
A soul that sadly stands at gaze
Across the bounds of narrow days,
Or leans beyond the little sod
Whereon her patient feet have trod;
A tranquil mind that knows at length
All its own weakness and its strength;
A face that seems to scorn the taint
Of smooth deceit or dull complaint,
The lines that fading beauty mar
Worn lightly as an honored scar.
With simple phrase, in words refined,

She speaks her sympathetic mind,
Points to the storm not far aloof,
And offers hospitable roof.
We follow through the little gate
And down a lane of evergreen,
Where the brown cottage sits sedate
The garden and the brook between.

Safe housed at once, each sets about
Some scheme to wear the minutes out :
The priest draws forth a pocket Plato ;
The clerk gnaws daintily a fig ;
The eldest boy gets a potato,
And makes a noisy whirligig ;
The ladies — well, the ladies pass
From hand to hand a little glass,
In which they take alternate squints
And give their toilets proper hints ;
One boy eats cake enough to choke ;
One father seeks a place to smoke ;
The other mutters of “expenses” —
I see, by looks he can not curb,
His thoughts decline a wicked verb
Through all its various moods and tenses.

But I from all their projects turn :
My mind dwells on the ancient dame,
And from her lips I long to learn
By what adventure here she came.
Oh ne'er was practised nicer art,
And never tongue more cautious moved,
When lover sought of maid beloved
The secret of her throbbing heart,
Than I put forth that day, to test
My theories of human-kind,
If I perchance the source might find
Of that mysterious interest
Which rose within me at the sight
Of wrinkled cheeks and temples white;
Where beauty lived in other days,
Where something lovely lingered yet
And on her life approval set,
Despite the dullness of its ways.
And ne'er did maid more shyly please
To let her lover's words prevail,
Than she retraced the covered trail
And gave her life-long silence ease.
I blend in one connected tale
What came by fragments and degrees.

She said: "'Twas on Manhattan's isle
These eyes first saw the light of day;
And smooth-faced Fortune's ready smile
Shone on me when a child at play.
My father counted up his gains
In liberal thousands, year by year,
And proudly dreamed his daughter dear
Should thrive upon the golden grains.
At eventide upon his knee,
In playful pride, he dandled me;
And with my childish laughter mingled
The coin that in his pocket jingled;
And which it was, I scarce could tell,
That pleased him best—for both pleased well.
Thus waxed the day of mirth and means,
Until it chanced to be my lot,
When I was midway in my teens,
To love a youth he fancied not.
The dreaded crisis came at length;
Nor words nor tears could move my sire.
We knew the meaning of his ire,
We knew his passion's stubborn strength.
Love, reason, kindred, thrust aside,
And every hope to ruin hurled,

We two, with calmly gathering pride,
Set forth alone to try the world.
Though wealth to me seemed useless ore,
Unless its glitter were refined
By gracious deed and generous mind,
And some plain stamp of manhood bore,
And though I grieved not for the loss
Of mine, too sadly mixed with dross,
I could not bear our path should cross
With any we had trod before.
Much less could he, who always felt
My fancied martyrdom more keen
Than I if it had real been,
Endure to dwell were we had dwelt,
Or linger in the altered ways
Where aught suggested other days.
Chance was our guide; and here we came.
We left not there the faintest trace
Which might reveal our hiding-place
Or bring us sympathy or blame.
It was as if our feet had crossed
Some boundary line forever lost;
Or, slumbering in our native bay,
Our bark had drifted far away,

And we had wakened on a shore
Untried, unknown, undreamed before.
The new life was a bliss to me :
I loved each rock, and flower, and tree ;
I loved this solitude and shade,
 This balmy air so pure and sweet,
And every noisy brook that played
 Around its mother mountain's feet.
I even felt a sort of pride
In thinking, though I lived and died
Where morning sun would never shine,
 Nor evening splendors make me glad,
 No royal captive ever had
Such glorious prison walls as mine.
His mind was cast in different mould :
 The woods and hills were not for him ;
His youthful ardor soon grew cold,
 His courage sank, his hopes were dim.
His thoughts were ever backward turned ;
His soul for old existence yearned.
This life to him seemed hardest lot —
Each rock was blundering Nature's blot,
The pools but baths for idle boys,
The brooklet's babble senseless noise,

The pine tree's sigh a song of woe ;

The mountains were the rubbish left,
Like *débris* in a studio,

When God this world from chaos cleft ;
And every shadow settling down
Between them was a giant frown.
He left one morn, as he was wont.

When evening fell he came not back.
I set the candle to the front,

And threw its light across the track
Would bring him to our humble door.
Alas ! it knew his step no more.

I searched the rugged mountain sides,
Far as my weary feet could climb,
Explored ravines where still abides

The wildness of primeval time,
And sent my voice through many a dell
Where dreadful echoes burst and fell.

But all in vain ! I never knew

What 'twas that snatch'd him from my life ;
For he had truly loved his wife
And kept her happiness in view.

He may have perished in these hills ;

He may have sought the wondrous West,

Intending to return and wrest
My fate from all its fancied ills.
I held my hope with woman's strength,
Found some relief in woman's cares,
Had faith and patience ; but at length
His name grew silent in my prayers.
The lonely years, in long array,
Came, lingered, glided slow away —
How many, I could scarcely think ;
Until one day the crowded stage
Stopped yonder by the cedar hedge,
And sending in they begged a drink
Of water for a fainting child.

I dipped the cup in that cool spring
O'erhung with ferns and mosses wild,
And went myself the boon to bring ;
And as I met each stranger's face,
They seemed another age and race.
With cautious gaze I peered inside,
And saw a bridal party there.
The groom was gay, the bride was fair ;
But I for this had little care —
A sudden whirling seized my brain,
A shock of pleasure-mingled pain ;

I knew my sister in the bride.
A moment more, the stage was gone,
And in the road I stood alone;
Nor since that day has ever come
One word or hint from friends or home.
I've dreamed, at once the postman brought
A life-time's letters to my hand,
Blotted and blurred with frequent brand,
As they had gone through all the land,
To find the loved one whom they sought.
To yonder post, with vague desire,
I've often laid my curious ear,
And even fancied I could hear
Some tidings in the humming wire.
I sometimes think my life has run
Beyond the measure of its worth,
And wonder when will rise the sun,
The last that I shall see on earth.
Again, life's brevity appears
The only mar-plot; and I plan
How all would round to right, if man
Could only live some hundred years.
But evermore this mournful thread
Through all reflection's tissue runs:

That if this dear one were not dead,
Were that one still the same as once,
Had these a few more years been spared,
Contented then I had not cared
For what might lie beyond the suns;
That loss and blunders manifold,
Which mar our brief existence here,
Were not its knell so quickly tolled,
Might be redeemed some future year;
That he who faltered at the start
And failed, were not the course so short,
Might, by some latent force or art,
Have won the race, the prize, the cheer."

